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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000702

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: UPFA government wins Provincial Council election; Tensions spike between UPFA and monk party

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston VA DTG 262308Z Apr 04

- (B) Colombo 694, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The UPFA government easily won the April 24 Provincial Council election in Wayamba, an area north of Colombo. In other political news, the JVP's ministerial nominees are scheduled to take their oath of office on April 28 after a compromise was reached in the JVP's dispute with President Kumaratunga's SLFP. In the meantime, tensions between the UPFA and the JHU, an all Buddhist monk party, continue to grow. Despite the win in Wayamba and the SLFP's modus vivendi with the JVP, the UPFA remains a minority government and full control of Parliament appears out of its grasp for the moment.
END SUMMARY.

Government wins provincial election

2. (U) On April 24, President Kumaratunga's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government won a decisive victory over the opposition United National Party (UNP) in the election for the Provincial Council of Wayamba ("Northwest") Province. (Wayamba consists of Kurunegala and Puttalam Districts, which are located north of Colombo.) The UPFA won 31 of the 52 seats on the Council, taking 59 percent of the vote. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, a major UPFA coalition partner, also did extremely well in the election winning all nine of the seats it contested. The UNP won 19 seats, taking only 38 percent of the vote. (The balloting in Wayamba was Sri Lanka's first election since the April 2 Parliamentary election, which was won by the UPFA. Sri Lanka has seven other provinces and six of these -- all save the north/east -- are slated to have provincial council elections later this year.)

3. (U) Turnout in the election was low. Only about 56 percent of voters turned out versus the roughly 75 percent that did so in the April 2 parliamentary election. The Colombo-based Center for Monitoring Election Violence, a local NGO, said the election was basically peaceful and "largely incident free."

Breakthrough in SLFP talks with the JVP

4. (SBU) In more good news for the UPFA, a compromise has reportedly been reached between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the major constituent element in the UPFA, and the JVP which ends their rift over ministerial portfolios. The major sticking point dividing the two parties had been the allocation of the Mahaweli Development (river basin) sector to a ministry headed by a SLFP MP, instead of a JVP-managed ministry. The JVP had claimed that Mahaweli issues should fall under its control, as its nominee was slated to take over the Agriculture Ministry (which in the past controlled such issues). Under the terms of the compromise, which was reached late April 26 after long days and nights of bargaining, the JVP will take responsibility for agricultural development in the Mahaweli region (the north-central area of Sri Lanka), while the Mahaweli river basin development program will remain within the SLFP-managed River Basin Development ministry.

5. (SBU) The compromise will allow four JVP ministers to be sworn in right before the regular "Wednesday" Cabinet meeting on April 28. (Due to the disagreement over the ministerial portfolios, the JVP's ministerial nominees had boycotted the main April 10 swearing in ceremony -- see Ref B.) The following JVP MPs are

slated to serve as ministers (pending the April 28 swearing in ceremony):

-- Anura Dissanayake, Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Irrigation
-- Vijitha Herath, Ministry of Cultural Affairs and National Heritage
-- K.D. Lal Kantha, Ministry of Rural Economy and Rural Industries
-- Chandradasa Wijesinghe, Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources

Tensions spike between UPFA and JHU

16. (SBU) In other political news, two Buddhist monk MPs from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party have been harassed for their April 22 parliamentary votes in support of the UNP's candidate for parliamentary speaker. (In an all-day session marked by bickering, the UNP's candidate, W.J.M. Lokubandara, won the Speaker post by a one-vote margin over the UPFA's candidate -- see Reftels.) In two April 24 incidents, supporters of the UPFA have been implicated in threatening the two monks and attacking their temples. Police have arrested one suspect who was said to have been involved in one of the incidents. During a Buddhist convention sponsored by the JHU held in a town south of Colombo on April 26, JHU monks again complained that their supporters were harassed, reportedly by JVP members. Separately, a televised April 26 interview with a UPFA deputy minister turned contentious when a JHU monk called in, warning that the JHU MPs would withdraw even conditional support for the government if the harassment continued. (FYI. Basically, seven of the JHU MPs are taking an anti-UPFA stand at this point. The other two JHU monks are considered to be pro-UPFA.)

COMMENT

17. (C) Despite the win in Wayamba and the SLFP's modus vivendi with the JVP, the UPFA remains a minority government and full control of Parliament appears out of its grasp for the moment. The bitter tenor of the UPFA's dispute with the JHU monks certainly will compound its effort to gain the 113 seats or more needed to form a majority in Parliament (the UPFA can currently rely only on about 106 seats). The fact that two JHU MPs voted with the UNP in the race for Speaker, allowing the UNP candidate to win and thus giving the government a black eye, has deeply angered the UPFA, and they seem unable to let it drop. At the same time, there is little doubt that any recrudescence of the SLFP-JVP infighting down the line will further hamper the UPFA's ability to govern. The good news for the UPFA is that some of the small parties that currently support the UNP, such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Tamil tea estate party, the Ceylon Worker's Congress, may still be willing to link up with the government if they are given the right assurances (ministerial positions, etc.). If that happens, the UPFA would be close to attaining majority status. That said, it appears more than likely that Sri Lanka will have an unstable situation in Parliament for some time to come. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.
LUNSTEAD